

The Sefer Yetzirah

The Book of Creation

Exactly what is the Sefer Yetzirah?

Although the name "Sefer Yetzirah" means "The Book of Formation", or "The Book of Creation", is not in any sense a narrative of Creation, or a substitute Genesis, but is an ancient and instructive philosophical treatise upon one aspect of the origin of the universe and mankind; an aspect at once archaic and essentially Hebrew. The grouping of the processes of origin into an arrangement, at once alphabetic and numeral, is one only to be found in Semitic authors.

See Bob Zucker's Kabbalistic Time Line for the history of The Sefer Yetzirah

§ The "Gra-Ari" version started life around 1550 A.D. Rabbi Moshe Cordevero sifted through the ten best manuscripts available, choosing the one most closely fitting the tradition of the Kabbalists. A generation later, the text was further refined by "The Ari", Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, one of the greatest Kabbalists of all time. A final edited text was finally produced by "The Gra", Rabbi Eliahu - Gaon of Vilna, in the 18th century. This is the version used by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in his Commentary "Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in theory and practice" (Revised edition, ISBN 0-87728-855-0, Weiser, 1997), considered by many to be arguably the most erudite commentary available in the English language. It includes the complete Hebrew, and English texts of all four major versions of this book, a clear and generous commentary and explanation, and in depth discussions of many areas of Kabbalah lucid explanations and diagrams. An absolutely essential addition to the library of anyone who purports to study Kabbalism, be it Judaic, Hermetic, Christian or Islamic.

From Rabbi Kaplan's Introduction

The Sefer Yetzirah is without question the oldest and most mysterious of all Kabbalistic texts. The first commentaries on this book were written in the 10th century, and the text itself is quoted as early as the sixth century. References to the work appear in the first century, while traditions regarding its use attest to its existence even in Biblical times. So ancient is this book that its origins are no longer accessible to historians. We are totally dependent on traditions with regard to its authorship.

Careful study indicates that it is a meditative text with magical overtones. Talmudic traditions indicate that it could be used to create living creatures, including the Golem! The Sefer Yetzirah is a small and concise book, only 1300 words long in the short version and 2500 words long in the long version. The first chapter discusses the Sefirot; The second chapter is a discussion of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the 231 gates; Chapters three to five discuss the divisions of the letters in relation to astrology.

The text was deliberately written in a fashion so that it would be meaningless to those who read it without an extensive background in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) and Midrash. To guide the novice, Rabbi Kaplan takes great care to introduce the necessary knowledge to the reader, making it accessible for the very first time to English speakers without a Kabbalistic background.
